Title: Reading Response 3

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About: This piece is a discussion post of 659 words that looks into and talks about “Undisciplining Victorian Studies”, by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, Amy R. Wong, and “Anglophone World Literatures: Introduction” by Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl.

In “Undisciplining Victorian Studies”, the text argues against the exclusionist colonial mindset that has informed scholarship in the field. What I found most interesting is the idea that Victorian Studies should solely be concerned with close readings of the white literary works of the time and not be concerned with the socio-political imperialistic racial contexts that informed the cultural formation of “Britain” as a whole, this is something the text refutes through exploration of ideas of “undisciplining” the “academic disciplinarity norms” that separate critical race, postcolonial, feminist, queer and cultural studies as fields separate to and not of concern to Victorian studies, despite the fact that  all the aforementioned fields are in large capacities informed by and concerned with contextual scholarship regarding 19th century imperialism and its cultural products. It goes on to state that the act of isolating the study of “Victorian” literature from its socio-political contexts can be understood as a means of sectioning off the era and suppressing the ways that the Eurocentric cultural imperatives developed during the time, have and continue to inform western cultural formations of today. The authors, paraphrasing Dionne Brand and Christina Sharpe, describe the act of becoming undisciplined in the academic and pedagogic sense, as the following; “To ‘become undisciplined’ is to reject this partitioning and co-opting of knowledge, and instead to invent ‘new modes’ of research and teaching that offer a ‘method of encountering’ what Sharpe evocatively names ‘a past that is not past’ – that is to say, the climate of anti-Blackness that spreads beyond the wake of the slave ship and continues to structure our lives and symbolic economies today.” Through this exclusivist model one is not made privy to the intersections between the “traditional” study of Victorian literature and the epistemological models that can be drawn from critical race or feminist study of the literature. I really appreciate the way the text envisions engagement of Victorian studies with critical socio-cultural works by trying to broaden the boundaries of Victorian studies, without falling into the trap of assimilating the differences within the various fields and perspectives that together inform the critical epistemologies related to Eurocentric 19th century racialized knowledge formations, while keeping the normative knowledge formations about Victorian Studies untouched. It wishes to bring to the fore interventionist scholarship regarding the normative knowledge structures of Victorian studies that have been suppressed or “invisiblized”. The text identifies this invisibilization through assimilation and categorization as being internalized into institutionalized forms of knowledge as “re-presentation within the framework of area studies, not one of decolonization or epistemic justice.” In my opinion this suppression of scope for critical analysis is symptomatic of a colonial discourse (or of any hegemonic formation for that matter) being woven into the very formation of the particular field.

A connection that I found interesting between this text, our class discussions, and the “Anglophone World Literatures” text is the sense of the centrality that Eurocentric knowledge formations place themselves in with respect to the idea of “world literature”, and the insistence that the positionality of all other forms of knowledge formations are contingent upon their relationality to the Eurocentric norms. What I think it is very important to recognize is that Victorian literature is very much contingent upon its intersections with the gendered, racialized and colonized “others”, which had huge influences on the cultural and socio-political formations of Victorian England. It also must be recognized that the critical scholarships regarding these formations were, at least in its inceptive stages, contingent upon study of the Victorian period, but while the critical scholarships recognize the importance of the period to the formation of their critical discourses, the normative scholarship surrounding Victorian studies cannot deny the importance of these very apparent intersections. The whole mindset of centralizing normative European knowledge formations to our epistemologies is a reflection of the exclusionist mindset regarding what is considered true literature, or part of the “canon”, suppresses the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of “world literature(s)”.